

RECORD OF THESIS

Lois T. Ficarro
(student's name)

Date July 20, 1973

Title of thesis: The Grave as Proscenium in the
Poetry of Emily Dickinson

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master
of Arts degree, I hereby submit to the Dean of
Graduate Programs 2 copies of my thesis, each of which
the signatures of the members of my graduate committee.

I have paid the thesis binding fee to the Business Office
in the amount of \$ 8.00, @ \$4.00 per copy, the receipt number
for which is _____.

Lois T. Ficarro
(Signature)
(by cfp)

THE GRAVE AS PROSCENIUM IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

A Monograph
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Lois T. Ficarro
June 1973

Accepted by the Faculty of the School of Humanities,
Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts degree.

Charles J. Pelfrey
(Director of Monograph)

Master's Committee:

Charles J. Pelfrey Chairman

Donald H. Cunningham

Victor Venetozzi

July 12, 1973
(Date)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	i
Chapter	
I. A FAIRER HOUSE THAN PROSE.	1
II. SEEING -- NEW ENGLANDLY.	8
III SCENE FOR SCENE, ACT FOR ACT	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY	48

INTRODUCTION

For several years, two facets of literature have held a very special fascination for me: the poetry of Emily Dickinson, T. W. Higginson's "cracked poetess", and the general field of drama and the theatre. Since much of my scholarly and most of my pleasure reading has been done in these fields, forcing them into a proximity, I have been struck by some of the similarities found in them. Obviously it is not novel or particularly exciting to note that a great deal of acclaimed and classic drama is in verse form; one has only to read the plays of Shakespeare to find the supreme example. What is a rather different, but not an original view, is that which finds drama in lyric poetry--especially the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

A close examination of the poetry of Emily Dickinson reveals a repetitive pattern, a form and content of drama and/or dramatic overtones. In fact, the dramatic devices are so prevalent and mentioned so often by bona fide Dickinson scholars that one wonders if Emily consciously framed much of her poetry as mini-dramas. Much good--even superior--drama is written deliberately in verse form. Might not the reverse be true in the case of the little New England spinster's lyric verse?

There are other questions raised by the idea. What is drama? What, in Dickinson's poetry, speaks of drama? Was this strange little recluse familiar enough with the form and the presentation of drama to have structured her verses with such deliberation and accuracy? Did

she have physical knowledge of the theatre and theatrical devices? Was she clever enough to have disguised such an obvious device in her poetry?

Hopefully, the three parts of this paper will answer some of the questions. The first portion of the paper will be devoted to use and definitions of terms and ideas. The second portion will be devoted to textual studies of some of her poems on death. The third and last portion will compare one poem with a well-known modern American play which also sees things "New Englandly."

CHAPTER I

A FAIRER HOUSE THAN PROSE

What, exactly, is drama? Poetry? Is it feasible that they can be one creation? There are almost as many definitions of these literary forms as there are textbooks, critics, and writers.

Poetry has been produced by every civilization in history, and it shows no sign of losing its power in our time If its special province is emotion, it is nevertheless also admirably suited to handling narrative or ideas poetry can accommodate itself to new ways of living because it is also an expression of the unchanging and universal essence of man's experience the nature of poetry is unchanged by its diversity of forms. We may still define it as the interpretive dramatization of experience in metrical language. [*Italics not in the original.*] Like other literature, poetry uses a dramatic method in the sense that it acts out whatever ideas it conveys.¹

Poetry often uses an imagined dramatic situation which can be defined by the answers to some or all of these questions: Who is speaking? To whom? Under what circumstances? What is the speaker's attitude toward the subject of his discourse? Toward his audience? . . . Poetry usually includes some element of narrative it communicates in many ways at once A work of art must be experienced as a whole; it is not a theme carted along in a vehicle, but an inseparable infusion--a complete flowing together--of theme and form.²

So, it would seem from the above statements, that interpretation of poetry in terms of drama is neither new nor unique. Indeed, drama

¹Lynn Altenbrand and Leslie L. Lewis, A Handbook for the Study of Poetry, (New York City: The Macmillan Company, 1966), pp. 1-3.

²Ibid., pp. 4-5.

is, in simple terms, a bringing to three-dimensional life the basic devices common to poetry: diction, imagery, metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, hyperbole, understatement, ambiguity, ellipsis and sound.

Is this exchange of form and interpretation mutual between these two literary forms?

Drama, like other kinds of literature, renders a human action, . . . it allows the agents in that action to represent directly their characters, emotions and deeds Drama resembles lyric poetry in its concern for sensations, feelings, emotions, moods, thoughts--in short, the inner life of characters who are the agents in dramatic action. . . . As in all other literature, the chief means of drama is the meaningful combination of words into discourse. . . . In order to attain its fullest effectiveness, drama employs two other means, the rhythm and melody of speech and occasionally of song, along with discourse; hence practically the whole range of poetic and stylistic devices is available to the dramatist.¹

The art of drama is an art of intensification. . . . Intensification is a characteristic of dramatic effect drama renders life at its highest pitch and represents those periods in human character and action that are decisive and final. This necessary concentration upon the climactic moments in human conduct makes the span of action in drama relatively brief.²

It takes only the smallest change, substitution of "the poetry of Emily Dickinson" for the word "drama" in the previous paragraph to show the basic similarities between these two literary forms.

Drama as an art is designed to produce an aesthetic experience in the reader or spectator. The effect it

¹Hubert Heffner, The Nature of Drama. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1959), p. 339.

²Ibid., p. 341.

produces is basically emotional and is an aesthetic emotional experience which enlarges an individual's awareness of himself and his understanding of his fellow men When the playwright-poet writes he creates an ordered universe, and the order of that universe is dominantly a moral order.

It seems that Emily Dickinson described both drama and poetry in her famous comment to Higginson in one of her letters: "If I read a book, and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry."²

Francis Manley also believes that Dickinson's dramatization of her poetry was deliberate; that dissection of the two forms was well-nigh an impossibility:

First, she usually set up for her persona some sort of external ritual or drama which contains various levels of calm objectivity. Then, through various series of ironic involutions generated in the course of this symbolic action, she eventually led the reader from appearances to the reality of a silent anguish made more terrifying by its ironic presentation.³

A true blending of these two literary arts can be found as far back as Aristotle; in his analysis of a play as a poetic composition, he allots it six major parts. Listed in his order of importance, they are plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle.⁴ It will

¹Heffner, pp. 349-351.

²Thomas H. Johnson, ed., Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), p. x.

³Thomas M. Davis, ed., Fourteen by Emily Dickinson. (Chicago: Scott Foresman and Company, 1964), p. 52.

⁴Heffner, p. 347.



be interesting to look at some of Emily Dickinson's poems with these ideas in mind.

Another definition of drama which will be used herein encompasses the idea that drama is " . . . a form of literature which presents plot, theme, character, conflict and crisis through narration, dialogue, setting, costumes, scenery and physical action."¹

According to James A. Herne, drama has a high, almost mystical purpose:

. . . . to interest and instruct drama has supreme faith in man. It believes that that which was good in the beginning cannot be bad at the end. It sets forth clearly that all the concern of one is the concern of all. It stands for the higher development and thus the individual liberty of the human race.²

Various comments, definitions, insights and discussion of drama could all be read with equal accuracy as comments on the poetry of Emily Dickinson; words such as "conflict", "crisis", "vividness", "spaces of life", "experience", "struggle",--all lead to an interpretation often given to her poetry and sometimes applied to drama; that just maybe poetry/drama is a metaphysical examination of people, life and eternity.³

Emily Dickinson lived during the greatest period of growth in the American theatre. This fact alone lends some credence to the theory that she had had some personal contact with the performing art at some point in her life.

¹Heffner, p. 351.

²Alan S. Downer, ed., American Drama and Its Critics. (Chicago: Gemini Books, IV, 1965), p. 9.

³Ibid., pp. 180-183.

During the years prior to her voluntary seclusion, Emily's world included seventeen major theaters which were flourishing in New York City, seven more in Boston, six in Philadelphia and fourteen in Washington, D. C.¹ Emily is known to have visited each of these cities at least once, and public performances of Shakespeare were an almost daily occurrence in each of them. Since documentation has been given that Emily's favorite author was Shakespeare, it seems only logical to infer that she would certainly have attended performances of his plays when they were available to her.²

Starring in these productions were such renowned actors as the Booths, the Drews, the Kembles, E. L. Davenport, and Amherst's own Clyde Fitch. Fitch claimed to have received his dramatic training at Amherst College.³

Further credence is lent by a reference to attendance at a performance by Jennie Lind in one of her letters to Austin, and in yet another letter, this time to her cousin and former roommate at school Louisa Norcross, she refers to having seen Fannie Kemble perform.⁴

¹George and Portia Kernodle, Invitation to the Theatre. (Chicago: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), p. 245.

²Jack L. Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading, 1836--1886. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 347.

³Phylliss Hartnoll, A Concise History of the Theatre. (New York City: The New American Library, 1968), p. 334.

⁴Theodora Ward, The Capsule of the Mind: Chapters in the Life of Emily Dickinson. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1961), pp. 156-159.

One specific example of internal evidence shows that Emily had a working knowledge of drama and the theatre.

741

Drama's Vitallest Expression is the Common Day
That arise and set about us --
Other tragedy

Perish in the Recitation --
This -- the best enact
When the Audience is scattered
And the Boxes shut --

"Hamlet" to Himself were Hamlet --
Had not Shakespeare wrote --
Though the "Romeo" left no Record
Of His Juliet,

It were infinite enacted
In the Human Heart --
Only Theatre recorded
Owner cannot shut --¹

1863

Further evidence of Emily's familiarity with the genre is reflected in her reading material. A bibliography of volumes inscribed to her or by her includes an eight-volume edition of Shakespeare, a two-volume edition of English Comedies, Life Drama, and Harold, a Drama.² This would tend to prove that Emily also had a reading knowledge of the form.

Application of dramatic aspects seemed to permeate her life as well as her poetry. Biographer Charles R. Anderson appears to be almost enamored of the idea:

¹Thomas H. Johnson, ed., The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), p. 363.

²Capps, pp. 147-188.

. . . . the poet dramatizes herself in a deathbed scene.¹

The funeral procession not only embodied the ambiguity of death that teased her, but dramatized it.²

. . . . there was deliberate self-dramatization in her behavior, and her withdrawal was a device for staging her appearances before the world³

Richard Chase has the same impression. He makes references such as "The scene opens," "The drama of sunrise and sunset", "The dramatic occurrences of summer rains and lightning storms impressed her," "The stage is now set for her presentation of love's connection with pain and death."⁴

That Emily Dickinson knew, and probably loved, drama is obvious. Now comes the exploration of the idea that she wrote drama, and wrote it consciously, deliberately, in all-encompassing, explosive mini-dramas disguised and costumed as lyric poetry.

¹Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise. (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 232.

²Ibid., p. 236.

³Ibid., p. 295.

⁴Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson. (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951), pp. 57-93, 104.

CHAPTER II

SEEING -- NEW ENGLANDLY

When we study a piece of literature, we are usually told the best methods for reading it; over and over we are told that drama must be read in a certain way: ". . . let your imagination go; visualize the scene; observe the movement of the characters in your mind; listen to their voices."¹ This could easily be the formula for the creation and interpretation of Emily Dickinson's poetry.

Application of the many facets of the term "drama" as has already been defined herein will be the major tool employed in the development of this paper. Obviously, it will be a subjective effort at best. Although the dramatic mode is visible in many of the nature and love poems, this paper will limit itself to dealing with only the death poetry. In these poems, ritual (the forbear of drama), religion (the move behind the first theatricals), and eternity (perhaps that posterity of life that echoes the posterity of classical drama) will be seen over and over again. In this three-fold viewpoint, we will also see that Emily Dickinson plays a three-fold role: she is poet/playwright, she is narrator/actor, and she is reader/audience.

Dickinson's poetry, especially her death poetry, seems to group itself into loose categories; there is a group of bride/housewife poems

¹Edward J. Gordon, The Study of Literature. (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1967), p. 484.

in which is found further division--the bride, the housewife doing her duty at the deathbed, the housewife who carries on her housewifely duties after a death has occurred, and, finally, the dead or dying housewife. There is another group which might be called the procession poems. In these, there is either a funeral cortege passing, or the seasons and years parade eternally past the dead. The group which is probably the most famous of Emily's death poems, however, is that series in which she personifies death as a Gentleman Caller, a dear friend, or a lover.

In the first poem dealt with in this paper, one of the housewifely group, the ritual involved is easily seen--this time it is the dual ritual of the preparation of the body for burial and the ritual litany of good deeds and works done by the deceased. Perhaps the only symbol of religion, if one is really needed, is the group of flies buzzing at the window--flies--insects whose very regeneration springs from death. Eternity, in this poem, is implied in the heavy, ponderous sound and feel of the words "soldered", "rivet", "hasps of steel", and "adamantine" instead of flesh for fingers.

Nor do the dualities end here. Who is the persona that is speaking? Is it Emily the dead housewife? Is it Emily the loved one who is arranging the body? Is it Emily in a narrative mode as the author? The answer to all three questions is a positive and resounding yes.

Aristotle's views are also present with the persona and her thoughts and/or dialogue. The "music" in this poem is a cacophony of sounds--little, everyday sounds: the buzz of flies, the scraping of the steel hasps, the clink of a dropped thimble, and the shuffle of tired feet--all moving to the rhythm of a neglected cobweb drifting back and forth in a slow, swinging arc.

How many times these low feet staggered --
 Only the soldered mouth can tell --
 Try -- can you stir the awful rivet --
 Try -- can you lift the hasps of steel!

Stroke the cool forehead -- hot so often --
 Lift -- if you care -- the listless hair --
 Handle the adamantine fingers
 Never a thimble -- more -- shall wear --

Buzz the dull flies -- on the chamber window --
 Brave -- shines the sun through the freckled pane --
 Fearless -- the cobweb swings from the ceiling --
 Indolent Housewife -- in Daisies -- lain.

Looking at the poem as drama, the first stanza very definitely creates the mood a good drama should evoke--an empathetic response to the weight of the grave. In stanza two, the reader/audience responds to the touch and feel of that which is dead and a shudder runs through the body of the reader at the finality of the thimbleless finger of an erstwhile seamstress.

The third stanza or scene of this one-act wraps up the idea and introduces the reality of flies, dirty window panes and cobwebs that do not fear an unmanned broom; all are present because the lady of the house is no more. Again, a sense of dramatic empathy is created; the reader/audience becomes involved in the action of the drama and the poem/play leaves the same sense of loss evoked by the Shakespearean scene showing Juliet lying on her bier with Romeo prostrate at her feet.

¹Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 88.

Poems 1100, 758, and 465 all deal with the same scene--yet all are different in their sameness. Generally speaking, there is the same ritual of waiting for death and setting the body to rights after death --the pause that comes just on the brink of eternity. It is in these frozen moments that the poetry of the dramatic scene is at its height --an almost haikuish instant expressed in drama, and much more than seventeen syllables.

In Poem 1100, the plot unfolds through the duality of the persona--the author is narrating a drama in which she is also playing the leading role of the woman who is dying and the minor parts of those who watch. Because of this, the poem presents not only the thoughts of the dying woman, but permits a glance at some of the inner thoughts of those who watch and wait. The dialogue is implied rather than stated and Dickinson's masterful narrative mode heightens this idea. Certainly no one can think that this particular style of dying is not a spectacle! There is a woman, straining weakly for one last breath; she is dying, however, in a room that is so crowded with people that there is no room to breathe. Struggling, she manages to make some last remarks which our narrator/actor finds too unimportant to mention specifically.

In this particular poem, the music which Aristotle mentions takes on a new form. A sense of dance and rhythm lie in the ebb and flow of people into the room, the ebb and flow of life itself, and the sway and dip of the symbolic reed. But it is a measure of rest--when all sound and motion cease--that life itself halts to gather enough momentum to begin again elsewhere. To ebb and flow once more on the shores of eternity.

1100

The Last night that She lived
 It was a Common Night
 Except the Dying -- this to Us
 Made Nature different.

We noticed smallest things --
 Things overlooked before
 By this great light upon our Minds
 Italicized -- as 'twere.

As We went out and in
 Between her final Room
 And Rooms where Those to be alive
 Tomorrow were, a Blame

That Others could exist
 While She must finish quite
 A Jealousy for Her arose
 So nearly infinite --

We waited while She passed --
 It was a narrow time --
 Too jostled were Our Souls to speak
 At length the notice came.

She mentioned, and forgot --
 Then lightly as a Reed
 Bent to the Water, struggled scarce --
 Consented, and was dead --

And We -- We placed the Hair --
 And drew the Head erect --
 And then an awful leisure was
 Brief to regulate --

1866

The poet/dramatist has structured her own version of the New England deathbed scene. The family is in attendance, life goes on in the midst of death. Ritual survives. Emily again adopts her three-fold existence.

¹Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 496.

Poem 465 again dramatizes the housewife and the fly. Certainly the ritual and religion are the same as previously seen, and then, at the very moment of slipping into eternity--there "interposed a fly."

Certainly there is no doubt that Emily is again the actor/poet/playwright/narrator/reader/audience. She is dying, hearing the music of the buzzing fly--yet she is watching some other, detached woman lying in the bed not knowing that other woman is hearing what she is hearing. She hovers with others around the bed, holding her breath, waiting; yet she is lying on the bed, unable, at last, to draw a breath. She is Emily the narrator/audience when she waits for the "King" to be "witnessed in the room." King of what? She is Emily Dickinson, actress and non-believer, when she lets a fly--carrion-eating and filthy as some would interpret it--come between her and--what? Eternity? Between her and the Light--the symbolic light of the soul--the Resurrection--Christ? That would certainly be characteristic of Emily Dickinson the poet as well.

Well-known critics and poets who study this poem see the setting clearly delineated.

As the poet dramatizes herself in a deathbed scene with the family and friends gathered round,¹ her heightened senses report the crisis

It is the triumvirate image again. Emily playing a three-part role with major emphasis on Emily the heroine who transmits not only her emotions through her narration, but who rivets her audience's attention on the minute fly while Emily the playwright/narrator sets the scene, runs the lights and draws the final curtain.

¹John Ciardi, The Explicator, XIV (January, 1956), Item 22, p. 232.

Caroline Hogue finds the scene almost an American literary stereotype:

Emily Dickinson's "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" should be read, I think, with a particular setting in mind--a nineteenth-century deathbed scene. Before the age of powerful anodynes death was met in full consciousness and the way of meeting it tended to be stereotype. It was affected with a public interest and concern, and was witnessed by family and friends. They crowded the death chamber to await expectantly the burst of dying energy to bring on the grand act of passing. Commonly it began with last-minute bequests, the wayward were called to repentance, the backslider to reform, gospel hymns were sung, and, finally, as climax, the dying one gave witness in words to the Redeemer's presence in the room, how He hovered, transplendent in the upper air, with open arms outstretched to receive the departing soul. This was death's great moment Here in this poem, the central figure of the drama is expected to make a glorious exit.¹

Emily the author could draw from her own experience to recreate such a scene. Her attendance at two particular deathbeds has been made much of by her biographers. When she was only thirteen, a childhood friend (Sophia Holland) died lingeringly of "brain fever." Emily spent hours at the bedside of her dying playmate and kept a long vigil over the body after death. She also spent months nursing and waiting on her mother during Mrs. Dickinson's lingering illness. The vigil kept by the teen-aged Emily was repeated with her mother's death.² Emily was also "taken" with the death scenes in Shakespeare's plays.³

¹Davis, p. 68.

²John Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971) p. 72.

³John E. Walsh, The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson, (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 190.

465

I heard a Fly buzz -- when I died --
 The Stillness in the Room
 Was like the Stillness in the Air --
 Between the Heaves of Storm --

The Eyes around -- had wrung them dry --
 And Breaths were gathering firm
 For that last Onset -- when the King
 Be witnessed -- in the Room --

I willed my Keepsakes -- Signed away
 What portion of me be
 Assignable -- and then it was
 There interposed a Fly --

With Blue -- uncertain stumbling Buzz --
 Between the light -- and me --
 And then the Windows failed -- and then
 I could not see to see --¹

Here Aristotle's requirements are all met, but the most interesting reference is again the music. There is the dull, continuous buzz of the fly, which this time intrudes upon the measures of rest written into the score. Instead of harmony as one usually encounters in musical compositions, there is dissonance and discord. The "note" of the fly is off-key, as it were.

What an interesting literary-dramatic symbol/device/character Emily chooses when she introduces by name a winged creature not exactly Godlike at the precise moment one would expect to find winged heavenly beings in the room. Most of us find that flies crawling around are not pleasant--but still, Emily remembers and makes her audience aware--the blue fly is also one of God's creations.

Allen Tate reinforces the dramatic theme in the poem:

¹Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, pp. 223-224.

The general symbol of Nature is Death, and
her weapon against Death is the entire, powerful
dumb-show of Puritan theology.¹

Tate is indeed right; Cotton Mather would have burnt her for a witch!²

The spectacle, persona, thought, diction and plot have not
changed much from poem 1100, yet there is a vast difference between the
two poems, just as we will find between poems 465 and 758.

In Poem 758 the vision of the author/narrator/audience is focused
intently and minutely on the dead body itself.

758

These -- saw Visions --
Latch them softly --
These -- held Dimples
Smooth them slow
This -- addressed departing accents --
Quick -- Sweet Mouth -- to miss thee so --

This -- We stroked
Unnumbered Satin
These -- we held among our own --
Fingers of the Slim Auroras
Not so arrogant -- this Noon --

These -- adjust -- that ran to meet us --
Pearl -- for Stocking -- Pearl for Shoe --
Paradise -- the only Palace
Fit for her reception -- now --³

This poem, though vastly different from Shakespeare's Yorick
scene, is strangely reminiscent of Hamlet's eulogy over the skull--one
of the most dramatic scenes in all theatre.

¹Ray B. Browne and Martin Light, Critical Approaches to American Literature, Volume II, (New York City: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1965), p. 59.

²Ibid., p. 61.

³Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 371.

Critic Ruth Miller, in discussing Poem 758, tells us:

. . . . A woman lies dead. The crisis is past. Her soul is in Paradise. . . . The poem is everywhere in motion. The persona is literally busy preparing the corpse for burial. First the eyes the persona bends to bestow a last kiss The next action we know by implication only¹. . . . the corpse will be transported to the grave.

Reading further brings Miss Miller's comment that Emily Dickinson consciously used the dramatic key in her writing of poetry.

The same modulation continues to occur, the same links join the dramatic art of Shakespeare and the particular activity of this poet. . . . drama needs the theatre.²

Miss Miller concentrates a great deal of her study on the "packaging" of Emily's poetry in thread-stitched fascicles and positively suggests that the poet deliberately bound her poems into little playlets.

The degree to which each fascicle has its own inner design may be verified by anybody who cares to read the gatherings of poems as the poet intended. They do not all say the same thing, but they all do have an intrinsic dramatic narrative as their central structure.³

Even the most superficial reading of this simple poem reveals the inherent stage directions which the poet included. "These saw visions"--the narrator/actor must point or gesture toward the eyes. "These held Dimples", again, she must gesture, this time toward the cheeks. The more elaborate the poem/play, the more elaborate the stage directions.

¹Ruth Miller, The Poetry of Emily Dickinson, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), p. 262.

²Ibid., p. 263.

³Ibid., p. 269.

As in the previous poems, the setting is the same, but there is no surrounding crowd to get in the way. The body lies on the bed and someone is preparing it for burial. Both roles are played by Emily. Along with the same persona and audience seen before in Poems 1100 and 465, the narrator returns and begins her ritual litany similar to that seen in Poem 187 and which will be seen again in Poem 445. This time, it is a recital of the different portions of the temple of the soul: the eyes, the cheeks, the mouth, the hair, the fingers, the shoeless feet. All portions of the persona are touched and then laid away by the narrator/actor/writer as the scene is played out.

Here, too, the music which Aristotle requires is seen merely as a rhythmic pattern, a touching and stroking which does not need sound to play its tune.

Miss Miller states with some authority that Poem 758 follows directly after "I Heard a Fly Buzz" in logical order in the fascicle, and shows the next scene in the little drama; first the deathbed scene and the instant of passing, then the heartbreaking family chore of arranging the body on its bier.¹ It seems reasonable then, that the next step--or act--in Dickinson's dramas would be the actual occupancy of the grave. In Poem 255, all three of these steps are found.

Carrying a previously-used motif, a three-scene one-act play, this poem carries the dramatic theme through a brief vision of the physical act of dying. In Scene II, the mourning period is enacted, complete with scenery and costumes. Scene III goes into the grave and projects the concern of the persona who died in Scene I for those who mourned in Scene II:

¹Miller, p. 272.

To die -- takes just a little while --
 They say it doesn't hurt --
 It's only fainter -- by degrees --
 And then -- it's out of sight --

A darker Ribbon -- for a Day --
 A crape upon the Hat --
 And then the pretty sunshine comes --
 And helps us to forget --

The Absent -- mystic -- creature --
 That but for love of us --
 Had gone to sleep -- that soundest time --
 Without the weariness --

In this poem there is the ritualistic religious symbol of death's being only a sleep; the ritual of life going on although we have mourned our loss and worn the accepted outward emblematic black bands. One wonders if the "pretty sunshine" of which Emily speaks is representative of the Christ--the light of the soul, symbol of Resurrection and eternity.

The persona here is not so explicitly defined as it is in other poems, yet here again Emily is in her old roles of actor/narrator, poet/playwright and reader/audience. The music here is not expressed, but there is a certain restrained rhythm implied by the very fading away of life in Scene I, grief in Scene II, and awareness in Scene III. The spectacle, as Aristotle would probably have seen it, comes through the seeming ease and magnificence with which death comes, conquers, thrusts into mourning and then is rather swiftly forgotten.

In the conduct of this drama of the soul, Emily uses a poetical ordinance that has certain basic features, but plays into almost every possible direction in their exercise. She develops images out of precision, . . . vigor and homeliness²

¹Johnson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, pp. 116-117.

²William Gibson and George Arms, eds., "Emily Dickinson", *Twelve American Writers*, (New York City: The MacMillan Company, 1962), p. 612.

In Poem 389, Emily provides a wealth of dramatic detail. There is the ritual of the neighborly visits, the doctor's leave-taking, small children rushing by a "spooky" place, the minister's duty-call on the family, the sombre man with the hearse and, of course, the housewife's rituals that must continue even though death lives in the house. There is also Emily's procession motif--rather like the one seen in the beginning of Poem 98 which will be discussed later in this paper.

389

There's been a death, in the Opposite House,
As lately as Today --
I know it by the numb look
Such Houses have -- alway --

The Neighbors rustle in and out --
The Doctor drives away --
A Window opens like a Pod --
Abrupt -- mechanically --

Somebody flings a Mattress out --
The Children hurry by --
They wonder if it died -- on that --
I used to -- when a Boy --

The Minister goes stiffly in --
As if the House were His --
And He owned all the Mourners -- now --
And little Boys -- besides --

And then the Milliner -- and the Man
Of the Appalling Trade --
To take the measure of the House --

There'll be that Dark Parade --

Of Tassels -- and of Coaches -- soon --
It's easy as a Sign --
The Intuition of the News --
In just a Country Town --

Certainly, the religious implications stand out. There is the trip of the minister who is not only actual, but symbolic of all the

¹Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, pp. 185-186.

pseudo-religious trappings of dying. Eternity is present in the fact that we see only the beginning of the procession--a journey about to begin but to which we can discern no end.

The dramatis personae in this little drama is perhaps Emily's largest cast of individual characters; the dead, the narrator, the neighbors, the doctor, the children, the minister, the milliner, the undertaker, and, implied in the last stanza, the entire populace of a small New England town. Still, Emily persists in her old roles as narrator/actors/playwright--and adds a bit of spice by referring to herself in masculine gender.

The plot is one of her most detailed; the dialogue as crisp as the bustle in the house. Whether there is any music present depends on the frame of reference the reader/audience brings to the poem/drama. It would seem that the narrator/playwright does feel the music--in the comings and goings of all the people like small figures on a clock, and then, there is the implied tolling of the bells which inevitably occurred to announce a death in small nineteenth-century towns and then rang again during the funeral cortege.

In Poem 98 ritual and religion abound in such terms as the bishopric "mitred" and "crown"--much like the procession and symbols used at a papal crowning. As in all the death poetry, eternity plays a great part. Instead of the accolades which are usually heaped upon the living, this pomp and circumstance accompanies one who is journeying into eternity. The setting is somewhat reminiscent of the old medieval pageant-wagon plays in which successive scenes were staged on separate wagons which stopped along a pre-determined path, usually terminating at the church door. The church metaphor used in the poem also

lends itself to this interpretation, as the church was the source and medium of drama. Scenic details sufficient enough for set construction are given in the poem.

98

One dignity delays for all --
 One mitred afternoon --
 None can avoid this purple --
 None evade this Crown!

Coach, it insures, and footmen --
 Chamber, and state, and throng --
 Bells, also, in the village
 As we ride grand along!

What dignified Attendants!
 What service when we pause!
 How loyally at parting
 Their hundred hats they raise!

How pomp surpassing ermine
 When simple You and I,
 Present our meek escutcheon
 And claim the rank to die! ¹

In this poem Emily has presented two of her favorite scenes: the progression of a burial procession and the pomp of an elaborate religious ritual. Through narrative, she gives us a description of the emotions raised by the scene she is viewing. With apt narration, she also expresses precise action.

While the theme of death and the metaphoric journey thereto is universal to all forms of literature, it has been most actively and successfully used in the theatre. The earliest "dramas" presented in the churches involved the Stations of the Cross--probably the most profound journey to the grave ever made. The implied motion in the poem is of the same found in the Stations--a starting and stopping, a delay, an indication of previous motion which is now terminating. The narrator/

¹Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 48.

actor "rides along" and then has another "dramatic pause" for obeisance being made by people who doff their hats in deference to the dead.

In the last stanza (or scene) Emily embodies the elements which are essential to dramatic tragedy: something terrible--in this case death--must befall the heroine, and the individual must be of sufficient rank to cause the tragic occurrence to be intensified.

In an overview, Emily's carefully-structured mini-drama is easily seen. She creates a scene based on a dramatic theme, populates it with a crowd and a central character, and plays out the roles herself before the reader/audience--Emily Dickinson.

The next poem, Poem 445, the central character is again the housewife; the poem, however, is more a member of the procession group. Emily Dickinson, though never a professing Christian, builds more ritual and theology into this poem than most modern-day churches possess. While sacramental processions, the Litany of the Saints and the Rosary have all but been discarded because they are considered outmoded and old-fashioned, people still respond to Emily's litany of the seasons and rosary of delights as found in this poem.

445

Tw'as just this time, last year, I died.
I know I heard the Corn,
When I was carried by the Farms --
It had the Tassels on --

I thought how yellow it would look --
When Richard went to Mill --
And then, I wanted to get out,
But something held my will.

I thought just how Red -- Apples wedged
The stubble's joints between --
And the Carts stooping round the fields
To take the Pumpkins in --

I wondered which would miss me, least,
 And when Thanksgiving, came,
 If Father'd multiply the plates --
 To make an even Sum --

And would it blur the Christmas glee
 My Stocking hang too high
 For any Santa Claus to reach
 The Altitude of me --

But this sort, grieved myself,
 And so, I thought the other way,
 How just this time, some perfect year --
 Themself, should come to me --

The housewife is dead--has been dead for exactly one year as she tells her reader/audience--and is reciting the list of all the things in nature which she remembers, and recalls, with love, the times of family gatherings. Finding these thoughts too painful, she resorts to the Christian doctrine of the afterlife and contemplates an eternity which she will someday share with her loved ones. Emily, the housewife, will be reunited with father, husband, family; and even her audience--in eternity.

There is a procession pattern begun here which Emily perfects in a later poem (712), plus the procession of the yearly seasons. Plot is evident; the persona is present both in thought and remembered action. Here the music is heard in the "sound" of the corn, the creaking of the old cart wheels, the clink of plates at Thanksgiving and the "Christmas glee." There is certainly spectacle. What contrived, man-made extravaganza can equal the slow but sure change of Nature's seasons, here intensified by an old Shakespearean theatrical device called the compression of time. The poet/playwright condenses a whole year into six brief stanzas. The triumvirate is complete again. Emily has written, performed in and watched the drama. As Heffner states:

¹Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p.214.

. . . . the process of change has been completed and the exciting forces exhausted, so that equilibrium exists the end of a play is the consequence of the beginning,¹ and the beginning is the initiating cause of the end.¹

Not only is there dramatic unity, as Heffner defines his requirement, but every one of Aristotle's points is covered. Perhaps the ancient Greek scholar and Emily Dickinson had a great deal in common; they were not willing to settle for the ordinary run of things. For them, even simplicity dealt with complexity, and drama and poetry were one.

After the dying and the processional journey to the grave and eternity, Emily continues her dramatic poems within the tomb itself. In Poem 449, she is a new arrival, in 216 she is the persona who realizes just how safe she is in her new "home", but in Poem 592, she reflects the indifference which aeons of eternity must engender in the long-dead.

449

I Died for Beauty -- but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room --

He questioned softly "Why I failed"?
"For Beauty", I replied --
"And I -- for Truth -- Themselves are One --
We Brethren, are", He said --

And so, as Kinsmen, met at Night --
We talked between the Rooms --
Until the Moss had reached our lips --
And covered up -- our names --²

¹Hubert Heffner, Drama and Tragedy on Stage, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1967), p. 64.

²Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 216.

In Poem 449, Emily Speaks first as the narrator/actor, then she becomes a new occupant, and finally, eternity itself--and the dialogue, real dialogue which is rarely seen in a Dickinson poem--goes on into eternity--forever. She is audience, watching the little playlet, craning forward to catch the dialogue as the moss grows upward, making the voices fainter.

Aristotle's plot, character, thought, diction--all are here, though minimized. The music comes in the shared conversation and the memories as well as the blending of truth and beauty which make up good music. Whether the scene could or would be called "spectacle" is a moot point. Eternity would have to be a spectacle, and the drama deals with eternity. There is ritual here, the ritual of placing the dead in tombs in the ground and inscribing their names on cold stone. Religion is present in the implied idea of life which continues after death. Eternity is not present in the poem; it is the poem.

The persona of Poem 216 could easily be the same as that seen in Poem 449, a few centuries later. Here the actual ritual involved in the apartments tenanted by them is presented. There are satin-lined rafters within the stone mausoleum roofs--cocoons which protect the slumbering larvae of the soul--larvae which lie safe and sound waiting for the fulfillment of the religious promise of the Resurrection. It is here that Emily the poet comes to the fore and makes her point that these "saved" people are unable to see anything going on around them, even in eternity--save for the glory of the Resurrection which is to come.

Emily is still functioning in her three-fold existence; it is just that Emily the poet, the real Emily Dickinson, is a little bit stronger.

Aristotle's spectacle is prominently displayed in the eternal drama within the drama that goes on over the heads--literally and figuratively--of our sleeping persona. The music here is certainly the "music of the spheres."

216

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers --
 Untouched by Morning --
 And untouched by Noon --
 Lie the meek members of the Resurrection --
 Rafter of Satin -- and Roof of Stone!

Grand go the Years -- in the Crescent -- above them --
 Worlds scoop their Arcs --
 And Firmaments -- row --
 Diadems -- drop -- and Doges -- surrender --
 Soundless as dots -- on a Disc of Snow --¹

Here the poet/dramatist creates one of her greatest settings. The set itself is marble, draped in satin with a cyclorama reminiscent of medieval calendar art like the Duc de Berry's "les Heures" -- while the entire history of the world is presented act by act on stage. Emily, the narrator, Emily, the dead, Emily, the onlooker--is still the central character in the midst of all this splendor. In ten short lines, Emily, the poet, creates, presents and explains what it takes Elmer Rice a whole three-act play to do in The Adding Machine. Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night would fit tidily into one small corner of this tiny Dickinson playlet. In three interminable acts of mounting frustration, O'Neill comes to the astute conclusion that life is simply a ritual of damning disappointments which is not really worth living except that it makes us eligible for the afterlife. Rice spends

¹Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 100.

another three acts making us wonder if eternity might not be a giant hoax. Emily Dickinson does this same thing in one short poem--and with far more dignity. She does not see or play man as a cog in a giant machine, she simply portrays him as one as blind in his afterlife as he was in life--and more smugly secure in his eternal position than he had dared be before.

Charles Anderson seems to think of this poem as a staged battleground for the poet's unresolved religious dilemma.

Well aware of the controversy between religion and science that was shaking the Christian world at mid-century, she used it to dramatize the very real conflict between man's faith in immortality and his doubt of it.¹

In poem 592, the persona, the plot, the thought and the diction are all essentially the same--as well as the scenery. In this poem though, Emily the poet, and Emily the narrator go a little farther in speaking to Emily the audience. Great changes and long years are made compact and the dead, who found it easy to ignore the vastness of eternity in Poem 216, find it just as easy to ignore the everyday things they used to love. Morning is ignored and the purple glory of sunset goes unnoticed. The rich warmth of summer has no meaning to the cold dead, and something frozen does not--cannot--notice the cold. All the spectacle of nature is ignored. Could this be Emily the poet remonstrating those alive who also ignore the spectacle of nature? The persona here could be simply Emily the actor/narrator/audience; it could just as easily be the risen Christ confronted with a doubting Emily. The Christ image is enhanced and given more credence by the last scene

¹Charles R. Anderson, ed., American Literary Masters, Volume One, (New York City: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965), p. 985.

where the spices were given to men, yet sealed in stone.

If the drama is visualized, the scene Emily creates becomes a panorama. There is the world, a wall, purple draperies, exotic and common trees, the full bright sun and the rich colorful sunset. This is not merely narration--we can see the spectacle. The plot of this particular mini-drama is life itself; the thought is contemplation of life and eternity. There is no better music than the simple song of a small bird--even though it falls on deaf ears. Aristotle would be pleased to see that his evaluation still holds.

592

What care the Dead, for Chanticleer --
 What care the Dead for Day?
 'Tis late your Sunrise vex their face --
 And Purple Ribaldry -- of Morning

Pour as blank on them
 As on the Tier of Wall
 The Mason builded, yesterday,
 And equally as cool, --

What care the Dead for Summer?
 The Solstice had no Sun
 Could waste the Snow before their Gate --
 And knew One Bird a Tune --

Could thrill their Mortised Ear
 Of all the Birds that be --
 This One -- beloved of Mankind
 Henceforward cherished be --

What care the Dead for Winter?
 Themselves as Easy freeze --
 June noon -- as January night --
 As soon the South -- her Breeze

Of Sycamore -- or Cinnamon --
 Deposit in a Stone
 And put a Stone to keep it Warm --
 Give Spices -- unto Men --¹

¹Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 290.

The next poem which will be covered in this paper is a member of that group which personifies death as a suitor/lover/friend. The persona here, for the first time, is not Emily directly--yet she is present--for who is it that Death is wooing if it is not our actor/narrator, reader/audience, playwright/poet. Certainly there is plot--almost a love story--and it is given step-by-step. First Death woos stealthily and flirts a little; growing bolder he moves in with great fanfare to steal away his bride to live happily ever after--in eternity?

There is also ritual, the same one so often seen in Emily's poetry: the ritual of dying and the ritual of the cortege into eternity. There is also the ritual of the wooing. In this poem is there religion? On the surface it appears that there is not, but a second reading finds a suggestion of heaven in the phrase "brave at last with Bugles."

All six requirements of Aristotle are present, even in this short poem. There is the plot mentioned above, there is the semi-heroic Death, and the unseen, but ever-present, bride. There is diction, both stated and implied. Shrill and blaring, those brave bugles blast out Aristotle's music. One single word--"porcelain"--brings to mind the brittle veneer of modern drama.

There is another interesting note in the use of that same word. "Porcelain" could call to mind the physical aspects of the back room of a mortuary--so multiplying the image of death as does a candle placed between two mirrors. Death as a hero comes to claim his bride. He takes her away in triumph to the Resurrection which all the just deserve--a small romantic drama unfolding. But again Emily inserts a jarring dramatic reversal: the same thing she did with her flies in poems previously discussed. There is one last tie with the physical earth--the

ritual of medicinal cleanliness, the tidying up of the corporeal being which will continue as long as there is death.

1445

Death is the supple Suitor
That wins at last --
It is a stealthy wooing
Conducted first
By pallid innuendoes
And dim approach
But brave at last with Bugles
And a bisected Coach
It bears away in triumph
To Troth unknown
And Kindred as responsive
As Porcelain¹

Thomas H. Johnson has stated that in Dickinson's poetry
"Death becomes one of the great characters of literature."² This is
definitely true, and death as character reaches the apex of greatness
in what has been called "One of the perfect poems in English"³
Poem 712, which will be discussed at great length in Chapter III of this
paper is the ultimate creation of Emily Dickinson, playwright/poet. It
is this poem which caused this paper to be written: it is carefully
structured, expertly framed and consciously created as drama. The poem
may be considered a three-scene one-act play, as two previously dis-
cussed poems have been, or it may be thought to be a three-act play,
whole and complete.

. . . . in four compact lines the poet has not only
introduced the principal characters but she
has also characterized them in part; in addition, she

¹Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 614.

²Davis, p. 111.

³Ibid, p. 102.

has set the stage for the drama and started the drama moving.

Are the elements used to discuss the previous poems present? Does the poem fall within the groupings used? Certainly. There is ritual in the wooing, the procession, the burial, and in the pause we have seen Emily use before as she perches on the brink of eternity.

712

Because I could not stop for Death --
He kindly stopped for me --
The Carriage held but just Ourselves --
And Immortality.

We slowly drove -- He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure, too,
For His Civility --

We passed the School, where Children Strove
At Recess -- in the Ring --
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain --
We passed the Setting Sun --

Or rather -- He passed Us --
The Dews drew quivering and chill --
For only Gossamer, my Gown --
My Tippet -- only Tulle --

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground --
The Roof was scarcely visible --
The Cornice -- in the Ground --

Since then -- tis Centuries -- and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were toward Eternity.²

By now the plot is familiar. Death, as the gentleman caller, visits his ladyfriend and they take a drive. The drive evolves into the procession which leads to the grave and eternity. The housewife is

¹Davis, p. 111.

²Johnson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 350.

present in that the lady was too busy to stop her work. This analysis indicates that the poem fits into all three groups of Dickinson's death poetry: there is the housewife, the procession, and Death as lover.

Implications of religion are carried in the word "Immortality" and through the idea of time growing shorter as it moves toward the great day of the Resurrection.

A new dramatic character appears in this poem. Up to now, eternity has been equated with immortality as an abstract image. Here, Immortality becomes the third character in the drama--and a very important one. By now, he has become so important to Emily the poet/playwright and Emily the actor/narrator that he has been personified. The other general characters have appeared before (Poem 445); there are the children at recess near the school, presumably there are farmers in the field, and, if the usual small town atmosphere prevails here, there are friends and neighbors gathered along the path of the cortege and family members following after.

For music here there is the implied music of life--the common, everyday noises one expects to find in the small-town/countryside scene which Emily depicts. Then, too, there is the familiar knell of mourning played on the local church bells. The spectacle, too, is a familiar one. It is the age-old and ever-new journey of the dead from measurable time and space into eternity.

Richard Chase comments on the last two stanzas (scenes?) of the mini-drama, which he considers ". . . hardly surpassed in the whole range of lyric poetry."¹ He finds the economy of image compelling, and

¹Davis, p. 111.

and calls to our attention the suspended animation of the last scene which "with fine dramatic tact presents us with but one visual image, the horses' heads."¹

Charles Anderson again finds that Emily is at war with herself and her convictions--the conflict between Emily Elizabeth Dickinson and formal, accepted religion--the dramatic conflict which many believe was the ruling force of her very existence.

Its theme is a Christian one, yet unsupported by any of the customary rituals and without any final statement of Christian faith. The resolution is not mystical, but dramatic.²

It is in this poem, the Shakespeare of Emily's efforts, that the lyric dramatist finds her finest hour; for this reason, the third chapter of this paper will be devoted to a discussion and comparison of the dramatic forces at work in Poem 712 and a well-known modern American play.

¹Davis, p. 112.

²Ibid., p. 116.

CHAPTER III

SCENE FOR SCENE ACT FOR ACT

As previously noted, this chapter is a lengthy study of Poem 712, the text of which is given in the previous chapter. Contained herein is a comparison of this poem's dramatic structure with a classic representative of modern drama.

It has already been established that poetry's being interpreted as drama is not a new idea. For hundreds of years drama was written in poetic form. Even in today's sometimes senseless "Modern Theatre" poetry has almost as much a place as it did in the fifth century B. C., and the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries of the Christian era.

Virtually everything in modern culture found its way, in fact, into the theatre. The poets came into it--directly, as in the case of Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Robinson Jeffers, Garcia Lorca, and Brecht, and indirectly Because the drama, unlike the novel, is a concentrated form and a highly selective art, it aspires inherently to the state of poetry.¹

Looking merely at Poem 712 itself, one can easily see that it is structured into three scenes. With a little imagination, these may be expanded into full-fledged dramatic acts. There is a small cast of characters, and there is certainly evidence of a dramatic situation. (Aristotle's persona and plot are present, as previously stated.) The

¹John Gassner, "Introduction," Treasury of the Theatre. (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1963), pp. xii, xiv.

absence of expressed dialogue is not a hindrance, for pantomime has long been a staple in the cupboard of the theatre. Still, even pantomime is not necessary here, for Emily the narrator/playwright/poet uses the narrative mode of which she is so fond.

As stated above, in making the basic transition from poetry to drama, the drama must be broken into scenes and/or acts. In this particular poem, the task is simple. The first two stanzas make up Scene or Act I, the second two stanzas are Scene or Act II, and the last two stanzas are Scene or Act III. The poem may easily be interpreted as another example of Emily's three-scene one-act device; for purposes of this chapter, however, it is preferred that it be thought of as a full three-act play.

Only one special.-effects mechanism will be necessary to "stage" this new play: the moving cyclorama backdrop. This device works on the principle of a scroll, with a gigantic sheet of canvas replacing the parchment. It is rolled in whichever direction the staging of the play may involve, and in the nineteenth century, it was turned by hand from behind the wing curtains. Painted on the rolling canvas were the scenes which were needed to give the impression that the actors and/or vehicles were actually moving on the stage. The moving cyclorama was developed in order to give the impression of great mobility in the relatively small space that is the acting area on a proscenium stage.

Act I

The curtain opens to reveal a painted backdrop of homes which are lined up along a small town's main street. There is a carriage-- a real carriage complete with horses and chaperone--standing before the door of one of the houses. A front door opens and a gentleman--Death,

the gentleman caller--and a lady--Emily the bride/housewife, Emily the narrator--come out and get into the carriage.

There are three characters involved in this act, and all appear to be quite familiar and at home with each other. Immortality, the chaperone for the drive, sits quietly, nodding in assent as the conversation includes him. Death, the lover or dear friend, solicitous as he helps his lady into the carriage, bespeaks his gentility with each and every motion. His courtesy and gentleness extend even to the treatment of the horses for he uses no whip; there is no longer any need for haste. The Lady, or Emily Dickinson if you will, is clad in a thin white gown, swathed about the shoulders with a light stole of some filmy stuff worn more for appearance than for warmth. She steps eagerly into the carriage for the ride which she has evidently been anticipating despite her busy days. She and Death are old, old friends; they are eager to renew their previous friendship, and perhaps, become even closer.

It is Death who finally picks up the reins, clucks to the horses and, as the moving cyclorama backdrop is cranked, the carriage begins to "move" offstage toward the left. As the curtain closes on this act, one hears the shouts of children from the wings.

The use of the small town as a locale for a drama is neither new nor unusual. According to Ima Honaker Herron, American theatre may trace its origins to "small community life" wherein a Spanish-language play, "Los Moros y Los Cristianos, . . . dramatizing the life of a small settlement after the coming of the Franciscan fathers to New Mexico" could be interpreted as the first use of the small town as a locale in drama. She contends that in this small and insignificant

beginning are the roots of much of many native American late-day dramas. Miss Herron feels that without the background of the small town or village, there would be little or no representative American drama.¹

Act II

As the curtain reopens, the carriage is still on the journey begun in Act I; the cyclorama continues to turn to reveal a "passing" church, a store, then the school. In front of the painted schoolhouse several children are playing ring-around-the-rosy and skin-the-cat. They look up as the carriage passes, but display no untoward action or reaction. Some of them smile and wave at the Lady, who waves back and perhaps throws kisses at them. The parties in the carriage continue their conversation as the cyclorama continues to turn. As the schoolhouse "disappears" off stage right, the children exit with it, their voices dimming with the "distance."

The journey continues as the cyclorama turns, revealing that the carriage has now progressed from the town into the country. There is a small farm cottage with a dog in the front yard. He does not bark, but merely stands and wags his tail as the carriage "passes." Next appears a vast expanse of fields of wheat and corn; these are the well-tended crops of the owner of the farm house. The wheat and corn appear to be waving in the breeze. The feeling of motion is heightened by the fact that a few fronds of actual grain have been fastened to the cyclorama and are being blown by a wind machine off-stage.

¹ Ima Honaker Herron, The Small Town in American Drama, (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1969), pp. xviii, xix, and xxi.

beginning are the roots of much of many native American late-day dramas. Miss Herron feels that without the background of the small town or village, there would be little or no representative American drama.¹

Act II

As the curtain reopens, the carriage is still on the journey begun in Act I; the cyclorama continues to turn to reveal a "passing" church, a store, then the school. In front of the painted schoolhouse several children are playing ring-around-the-rosy and skin-the-cat. They look up as the carriage passes, but display no untoward action or reaction. Some of them smile and wave at the Lady, who waves back and perhaps throws kisses at them. The parties in the carriage continue their conversation as the cyclorama continues to turn. As the schoolhouse "disappears" off stage right, the children exit with it, their voices dimming with the "distance."

The journey continues as the cyclorama turns, revealing that the carriage has now progressed from the town into the country. There is a small farm cottage with a dog in the front yard. He does not bark, but merely stands and wags his tail as the carriage "passes." Next appears a vast expanse of fields of wheat and corn; these are the well-tended crops of the owner of the farm house. The wheat and corn appear to be waving in the breeze. The feeling of motion is heightened by the fact that a few fronds of actual grain have been fastened to the cyclorama and are being blown by a wind machine off-stage.

¹Ima Honaker Herron, The Small Town in American Drama, (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1969), pp. xviii, xix, and xxi.

The wind machine is turned off as the carriage passes, and the grain then seems to be "gazing" at the vehicle as it goes by. The lady points out over the fields and smiles, speaking pleasantly to her companions all the while, as though she is showing off the countryside to her friends.

Up to this point, the lighting used on the stage has been that which is referred to in theatrical terms as "standard daylight." At this point, however, the lighting begins to deepen and take on a darker hue, changing gradually from pale daylight-straw-amber to flame-burgundy-orange-amber, burnishing the entire stage with the wine of twilight. With the setting of the sun, the wind comes up again. The cyclorama continues to turn; there are more fields, an occasional lone cottage, and fenced pastures with grazing animals. As the pastures roll by, a very distant sound effect of lowing cattle will heighten the effect.

The wind becomes cooler, and the Lady shivers and draws her filmy stole tighter about her. Ever the gentleman, Death offers her his cloak, but she declines as the curtain closes.

Act III

The moving cyclorama has now been abandoned for a stationary guillotine backdrop. Upon this has been painted the headstones and monuments usually found in small-town cemeteries. These stones are clustered toward stage right. At left center stage is the barely-visible pointed roof of an elaborate family mausoleum. At stage left is a slightly elevated ramp, just wide enough to accommodate the wheels of the carriage; it leads up to an off-stage platform. The base of the ramp is covered with grass and simulated dirt, as though it were a roadway; the green of the grass pales out into light blue and then into

a neutral gray-blue at the top of the ramp. The usual heavy fire curtains found at the side of the stage have been covered with filmy chiffon-like scrim in the same neutral blued gray. As the carriage approaches, these curtains begin a barely perceptible motion which intensifies as the vehicle draws nearer, but stop completely when it eventually passes through them.

The carriage actually enters from stage right and is really moving until it passes slowly by the cluster of headstones. It comes to a complete stop in front of the mausoleum. The stop is only momentary and the occupants of the carriage glance about--this time Death appears to be pointing out something to the lady. Here again we see Emily's customary pause on the brink of eternity. Finally both of them settle back into the carriage, and, once again drawing Immortality into the conversation, they continue their journey up the ramp and onto the unseen platform as the curtain closes.

Dramatic Comparisons

The dramatic tone and narrative mode of the poem are not to be denied. While working with this poem, the writer became fascinated with its startling resemblance to dramas by another American writer--the New-England based play by Thornton Wilder called Our Town, and a one-act also by Wilder, called The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden. In both of these plays, the journey of the Lady and Death are closely paralleled and delineated. In both of his works Wilder, as does Emily Dickinson in most of her poems, expresses a strong philosophy. Without turning out an inane profession of a faith which neither may embrace, both these writers weave their beliefs skillfully into plot and language, making it so integral a part in the movement of the drama it is all but

unnoticed on first reading:

Nothing sums up the essence of Wilder's philosophy in Our Town better than the address on a letter sent to a Grover's Corners girl by a humorist, who, to Wilder, was probably unknowingly, the profoundest person in the world: "Jane Crofut, the Crofut Farm, Grover's Corners, Sultan County, New Hampshire, United States of America, Continent of North America, Western Hemisphere, the Earth, the Solar System, the Universe, the Mind of God."¹

Like Emily Dickinson's poem, both of Wilder's dramas are situated in the east; Our Town specifically in New England, The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden on the eastern seaboard. Both of Wilder's plays concern themselves with journeys. Our Town, of course, embraces the daily journey from life to death with another smaller journey from death to life and back to death again. The one-act play recounts one family's summer vacation trip, but there is still the profound underlying passage from life to death which is very necessary to the plot.

An interesting parallel is also seen when one considers that the heroine of Our Town is named Emily. Closer reading reveals more parallels; it is tempting to consider Emily Dickinson's poem as an inspiration for Wilder's play.

In all three works we are struck with the busy-ness of the people involved. The Lady was so busy she was unable to stop for even the inevitability of Death. In Our Town Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs go about their daily business, Editor Webb and Dr. Gibbs depart to their respective offices and the children go off to school. In The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, the house is abustle with preparations for the vacation trip: father is packing the car, mother is packing and

¹Gassner, p. 927.

stowing away the lunch basket, there are last-minute conversations with the neighbors and instructions from both sides.

Essentially, the landscape passed in all these journeys is the same: through the town and into the country passing a schoolhouse on the way. Fields and pastures, small country cottages, panoramic views of life as we all know it are native to each drama. Finally, there is death and infinity. The Lady and Death may journey forever.

Emily Webb, on her symbolic journey through life, passes from the unseen Main Street to school, to courtship, marriage, a farm of her own, two small children, and, finally, onward into death and infinity. Emily may journey forever, too.

There is one small change, a concession to modernity and accuracy by the dramatist, in The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden. Here the busy family passes from their small street through the town to the crowded highway; instead of enjoying uncluttered landscaping, the Kirbys comment only on the billboards. Occasionally, though, one sees true landscape through a comment:

Ma: Goodness, smell that air, will you!! It's got the whole ocean in it. --Elmer, drive careful over that bridge. This must be New Brunswick we're comin' to. . . My look at the sky, woudya. . . . What's this place? Arthur, did you see the post office? . . . Hhm. School --kinda nice. I wonder what that big yellow house set back was There's a sunset for you. There's nothin' like a good sunset.

The milestones are familiar to the audience by now: the house, the street, the town, the fields, the school, the sunset. We do not see the physical act of passing into Death and Infinity here, but we hear

¹Thornton Wilder, "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden," Prose and Poetry for Enjoyment, (Syracuse, New York: L. W. Singer Company, Inc., 1955), pp. 85-89.

about it because the Kirbys have lost one son in the war and a granddaughter died shortly after birth. Ma Kirby faces these deaths with much the same complacency as the residents of Grover's Corners and Emily Dickinson's Lady.

In Our Town, Emily Webb's gentleman caller, George Gibbs, is every bit as genteel, if a bit more clumsy, as Emily Dickinson's Death. He cares just as sincerely for his Emily, too. The Stage Manager is in constant attendance, performing the functions allotted to Immortality in the poem. He watches and waits as the life journey of these two young people progresses until Act III, when, just as in Emily Dickinson's poem, the journey is completed in the death of the heroine.

Much as Death, the lover or gentleman caller, brings death to Emily Dickinson's lady, George Gibbs, the lover/husband, has brought death to Emily Webb, who has died in childbirth. In The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, Beulah's husband Horace is used in the same manner--while Beulah did not succumb in childbirth, the tiny new daughter did.

In Act III of Our Town, paralleling stanza five of the Dickinson poem, we see Emily as she approaches the cemetery and pauses first at one stone and then another. She is neither afraid nor curious, but very much at home. Suddenly we notice another similarity between our leading ladies: their dress. As was the custom in New England up until the 1930's, young matrons who died were buried in their wedding dresses. Emily Webb was no exception. Neither, it would seem, was the Lady of the poem, for she describes her dress as "gossamer" and her tippet as "tulle"--both favorite fabric descriptions for bridal gowns and veils.

An overview and re-reading of Wilder's three-act play gives one more basis for comparison. Wilder names the acts in Our Town:

Stage Manager: The First Act is called The Daily Life. This Act is called Love and Marriage. There's another Act coming after this: I reckon you can guess what that's about.¹

(Act II, Scene i)

These names could easily be assigned to the acts created earlier from Emily Dickinson's poem.

Not only are the dramatic situations similar, but the tone of the poem and play are almost identical. There is gentle acceptance and a matter-of-factness about the dead. There is the omnipresent figure of the Stage Manager/Immortality. The journey which takes the carriage from Amhers (?) to Eternity is presented in the dual reproduction of Emily Webb's journey through life and her backward journey to visit a day in her past. During Emily's revisitation to "an ordinary day", her twelfth birthday, she recites a litany of the ordinary which was paralleled by the moving cyclorama in the dramatization of the poem:

Emily: There's the butternut tree, And there's the High School, forever and ever, and ever. And there's the Congregational Church where I got married One more look. Good-by, Good-by, Good-by world. Good-by Grover's Corners Mama and Papa Good-by to clocks ticking And Mama's sun-flowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths and sleeping and waking up.²

(Act III, Scene i)

Even more significant, however is Emily Webb's question to the Immortality figure--the Stage Manager--for it seems to echo the questions of Emily Dickinson throughout her poetry:

¹Thornton Wilder, Our Town, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1937) p. 68.

²Ibid., p. 94.

Emily: Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? --every, every minute?

Stage Manager: No. (Pause) The saints and poets, maybe--they do some.

(Act III, Scene ii)

Emily Dickinson made a significant contribution to the world of the literate in the form of her poetry, especially her death poetry. Perhaps she contributed to the world of drama its smallest and shortest examples. She made her contributions in poetic style, but in a dramatic manner in which the reader cannot fail to get involved. She managed to create and maintain a three-fold image in each of the poems discussed in this paper. As Emily Dickinson used her poetry to express her philosophy, her questions, her dilemmas, her thoughts, so might Thornton Wilder have found a kindred spirit in Amherst's little white-clad recluse.

Emily Dickinson--saint?--poet?--she realized. . . some. . .

CONCLUSION

While Emily Dickinson has at last been accepted as a poet of note, and the world is satisfied to give her the accolades her poetry has long deserved despite the rough edges, lack of form and odd punctuation she chose to use, I find there is much more to Emily's poetry than meets the eye.

Study of the texts of the poem in conjunction with much reading about Emily Dickinson's life and her habits have convinced me that the little lady from Amherst was quite clever and intelligent--and eminently capable of subtly creating little closet dramas in her poetry. This device permeates her poetry. It is present in the nature poems, the love poems, the cries of anguish she utters in the throes of her fight with accepted convictions; it is never more apt or beautiful, however, than it is in her death poetry.

Since biographers have long written about Emily's preoccupation with death and dying, it is obvious that it held a strange bond for her. It is equally obvious, then, that her death poetry should be her best and give the major clue to her acts of composition.

Emily Dickinson left us no map to the creation of her poems as Poe did for "The Raven"; but to those who choose to search and understand, the key lies within her poems themselves.

The question at the beginning of this paper can have but one answer--a loud and resounding affirmation that Emily Dickinson did have the background, knowledge, and familiarity with drama needed to present her poetry in dramatic form. More than this, however, was her physical

and mental need to ally herself with dramatic expression. Her life could be transported without editing to a modern stage. Why not her poetry?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altenbrand, Lynn, and Leslie L. Lewis. A Handbook for the Study of Poetry. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966.
- Anderson, Charles R. Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise. Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.
- _____, ed. American Literary Masters, Volume One. New York City: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
- Browne, Ray B., and Martin Light. Critical Approaches to American Literature, Volume II. New York City: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1965.
- Capps, Jack L. Emily Dickinson's Reading: 1836--1886. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Harvard University Press, 1966.
- Chase, Richard. Emily Dickinson. New York City: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1951.
- Ciardi, John. "Item 22," The Explicator, XIV (January, 1956.)
- Cody, John. After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1971.
- Davis, Thomas H. Fourteen by Emily Dickinson. Chicago: Scott-Foresman and Company, 1964.
- Downer, Alan S., ed. American Drama and Its Critics. Chicago: Gemini Books IV, 1965.
- Gassner, John. "Introduction," A Treasury of the Theatre. New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1963.
- Gibson, William, and George Arms, eds. "Emily Dickinson", Twelve American Writers. New York City: The Macmillan Company, 1962..
- Gordon, Edward J. The Study of Literature. Boston: Ginn and Company, 1967.
- Hartnoll, Phylliss. A Concise History of the Theatre. New York City: The New American Library, 1968.
- Heffner, Hubert. Drama and Tragedy on Stage. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, Inc., 1967.
- _____. The Nature of Drama. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, Inc., 1959.

Herron, Ima Honaker. The Small Town in American Drama. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1969.

Johnson, Thomas H., ed. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960.

_____, ed. Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961.

Kernodle, George, and Portia Kernodle. Invitation to the Theatre. Chicago: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1971.

Miller, Ruth. The Poetry of Emily Dickinson. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1968.

Walsh, John E. The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson. New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1971.

Ward, Theodora. The Capsule of the Mind: Chapters in the Life of Emily Dickinson. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1961.

Wilder, Thornton. "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden," Prose and Poetry for Enjoyment. Syracuse, New York: L. W. Singer, Co., Inc., 1955.

_____. Our Town. New York City: Coward-McCann Company, 1937.